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ABSTRACT

To identify characteristics of students in Florida's Early Exit Program (EEP) with respect to their performance in high school, names and General Educational Development (GED) test scores were obtained for all students who passed the GED tests as part of the EEP between January 1, 1981, and May 1, 1983. Four districts were identified that had administered a standardized test to all students in either grade 9 or grade 10 and had the test results in a central location. The correlations between the GED tests and district-level tests supported the notion that the GED measures intellectual skills and knowledge that one would expect children to develop during their school years. The students represented a fairly wide range of achievement, as indicated by the district-level tests. The relatively low proportion of students in the lower percentile ranges led to the inference that if low achieving students take the GED, they do not pass. A few of the brightest students appeared to elect the EEP as a way to shorten their tenure in high school. The EEP seemed to be serving a kind of upper-middle group of students, as measured by the district tests. The GED provided an opportunity for them to demonstrate that they have learned and are ready to go on to other pursuits. (YLB)

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RESEARCH BRIEF

GED TESTING SERVICE OF THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION • August 1986 • No. 9

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Performance Characteristics of Florida's Early Exit Equivalency Candidates

Howard W. Stoker

The State of Florida has been awarding high school equivalency diplomas through the General Educational Development (GED) Testing Program since 1946. By 1951, any Florida resident, veteran or non-veteran, age 20 or over, could earn such a diploma. Today, the test may be available to eligible candidates age 16 or over, depending on policies established by local school boards.

Florida is one of a few states which provides equal status for the equivalency diploma. Florida law specifies that a high school equivalency diploma shall have equal status with other high school diplomas for all State purposes. It is, for example, recognized by the State University System and the Community College System in the same light as graduation from high school. Florida's passing score (a minimum of 40 on each test and an average score of 45) is such that only about 67% of the norming group exceed the requirements for the State of Florida High School Diploma.

In March, 1973, *Improving Education in Florida, A Report by the Governor's Citizens Committee on Education*, recommended that programs be initiated to allow high school students to accelerate their progress toward a high school diploma. Chapter 75-30, Laws of Florida, was passed by the 1975 Legislature, creating the Secondary Level Examination Program (Section 229.814, FS).

With the passage of Section 229.814, the Legislature established a graduation acceleration mechanism to be based upon a standardized test. To implement this law, the State Board of Education selected the GED Test battery as compatible with existing educational policies and public expectations in Florida.

Typically, a student wishing to participate in the Early Exit Program, as it came to be called, would make application through the high school. A conference would be scheduled with the student, parents, school counselor, and other interested parties. If agreement was reached that the student would attempt the GED Tests, application was then made to the GED test center. If a passing score was attained, the equivalency diploma was awarded and the student's tenure in high school ceased. Students passing the GED Tests as part of the program are not permitted to return to high school.

In 1982–83, questions were raised pertaining to the Early Exit Program (EEP) and the students who were participating in the program. Little data had been collected regarding the reasons why students elected the program, what kinds of students they were or whether the program helped them meet the goals which led them to the Early Exit Program in the first place. Several studies were planned to answer some of the questions. One question deals with who the Early Exit Program students are with respect to their performance in high school. Are they low achieving students who can't pass high school courses? Are they high achievers who want to be finished with high school so that they may pursue some other activity? Or, are they fairly representative of high school students in general?

To help answer the performance question, names and GED scores were obtained for all students who passed the GED Tests as part of the EEP between January 1, 1981 and May 1, 1983. Four districts were identified which had administered a standardized test to all students in either grade 9 or grade 10 and had the test results in a central location. Districts were considered only if the number of EEP students was 200 or more. With the highly mobile population in Florida, it was anticipated that scores for only about 50% of the listed students would be found. In order for the analyses to have sufficient stability to provide dependable answers, a minimum sample size of 75 was judged desirable.

Three districts use the California Test of Basic Skills, two in grade ten and one district in grade nine. The fourth district administers the Stanford Test of Academic Skills (TASK) in grade 9. District records were examined for name matches between the district test lists and the list of GED early exit students tested in that district. District level scores were collected and recorded. The proportion of students for whom a match was made was about 50% in

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two districts and approximately 40% in the other two districts.

Analysis of Scores

Analyses were complicated by the fact that certain assumptions underlie the analytic models and that those assumptions could not be met. For correlational analysis, for example, we assume that one has two sets of scores for the same group of individuals and that those scores were obtained at about the same points in time. While two sets of scores (GED and standardized test scores) were available, the GED scores were obtained at different points in time, with the time lapse between district test and GED testing ranging from as low as 3 months to as much as 2–3 years. Another assumption is that the scores be normally distributed. Since the students in this study were students who had *passed* the GED Tests, there was little chance that the distribution assumption would be met.

Finally, there were differences between test batteries as well as time of administration among the districts. Both test batteries yield Reading, Language, Math and total battery scores, but the tests themselves are different. Even the same battery, administered in grade 9 and in grade 10, would measure different amounts of exposure to the curriculum of the schools for the students in the two grades.

All of these factors combine to influence the analyses within a district and comparisons among the districts. Working only with students who have passed the GED creates a restriction of range effect. This effect is known to restrict the size of the correlation coefficient. The impact of the other factors is largely unknown.

Given the potential impact of these factors, the most noticeable thing about the correlations was the similarities between them. Of the 40 correlations which were possible, only three of the district-pair correlations were significantly different and all three involved the district which suffered most from restriction in range and which had the lowest correlations.

The correlations follow expected patterns, with reading showing higher correlations with the other tests, except for mathematics (See Table 1). For example, correlations of Reading Skills and Writing Skills, ranged from .47 to .71; Reading Skills and Social Studies (.56 to .73); Reading Skills and Science (.59 to .70); and Reading Skills and Mathematics (.31 to .48). Statistically, all the correlations are significantly greater than zero, but given the sample sizes and the nature of the tests, this comes as no surprise.

Correlations between the GED Tests and the district level tests also follow expected patterns. The restricted range for GED Tests in District D, is again reflected in the lower correlations with the district level tests. Other than that, the correlations are about what one would anticipate, given the differences in tests and testing times mentioned earlier. The GED Mathematics scores are most highly related to the district math scores (.48 to .62); the other GED test scores reflect lower correlations with math than with reading and language. This probably reflects the emphasis on reading in the GED Tests.

The correlations seem to imply that the objectives being

TABLE 1

INTERCORRELATIONS FOR GED TESTS AND DISTRICT TESTS

	District Tests				
	Reading	Language	Math	Total Battery	District
GED Writing Skills	54	69	36	60	A
	59	60	44	60	B
	51	60	43	56	C
	44	51	42	49	D
GED Social Studies	62	52	34	56	A
	61	46	38	54	B
	43	37	32	53	C
	38	26	20	34	D
GED Science	63	55	43	63	A
	50	35	34	44	B
	45	38	34	46	C
	49	32	32	45	D
GED Reading Skills	74	61	42	66	A
	55	39	23	41	B
	50	50	36	52	C
	46	33	11*	33	D
GED Mathematics	46	42	60	58	A
	33	31	57	47	B
	28	40	62	55	C
	34	36	48	44	D

Brackets indicate pairs of correlations where a significant difference ($\alpha = .05$) occurs.

* .11 is a correlation which is not significantly greater than zero ($\alpha = .05$)

measured by the district tests are also measured by the GED Tests. Students who do well on the GED Tests are students who did well on the district tests at an earlier time, and vice versa. In other words, the correlations support the idea that the GED Tests measure a sampling of high school curricula and skills, as do the tests administered by the districts.

. . . the correlations support the idea that the GED Tests measure a sampling of high school curricula and skills.

The similarities among the correlations and other descriptors led to the decision to combine the scores for students in Districts A, B, and C for further analyses, and to keep the scores for District D separate. Initially, correlations among the GED Tests for the combined districts were calculated in order to compare those values with the correlations available from the GED Testing Service.

The correlations for the combined districts were all lower than the correlations based on national samples. This was expected because the Florida sample contains only students who have passed the GED. The correlations follow similar patterns, except for Mathematics where the correlations are lower than one would expect. A comparison of means and standard deviations for the Mathematics test showed that the mean for the Florida students was more than 6 points higher than the national GED sample mean. The standard deviation for the Florida group was 2.5 units smaller than the national value. Hence, the math score distribution appear to be most seriously restricted, which could be the cause of the lower correlations.

To further examine the relationships between the GED Tests and the district level tests crosstabulations were constructed for selected pairs of tests. To pass the GED Tests in Florida one can have no standard score less than 40 and an average of 45 or more for the battery. For the norming sample, approximately 20% of the seniors tested had standard scores less than 40 on a given test. In the combined district analyses, only 11% of the students had scores less than 44 on the Writing Skills Test, and only 5% had scores less than 44 on the Reading Skills and Mathematics Tests. Hence, there is a considerable restriction in range at the lower end of the score distribution.

To provide a common base for comparisons, scores for the district level tests were converted to percentile ranges, using appropriate conversion tables provided by the test publishers. Mid-year norms were available for the CTBS; fall norms were used for the TASK. For the GED standard scores, a 4-point range was used in order to produce a set of tables which would allow one to examine relationships without too much difficulty.

As noted earlier, the question which led to this investigation had to do with the performance of students who had passed the GED Tests on tests taken earlier in their high school careers. For the combined districts, about one half of the students had scores on reading and language tests which placed them below the median score. For the reading, language, and math tests, about 20–25% had scores below the 30th percentile. For all three tests, only about 10% of the students had scores in the top 20 percentile range.

One could conclude, then, that those who passed the GED as part of the Early Exit Program were not predominately "cream of the crop" type students, nor were they students who were at the bottom of the achievement

Students who passed the GED Tests represented the entire range of school achievement, as measured by the district tests.

distribution. Students who passed the GED Tests represented the entire range of school achievement, as measured by the district tests. There were more students in the 40–80 percentile range than one would expect, however.

These results tend to support one of the conclusions reached in the study conducted by Behavioral Science Research in 1984 (Ladner (1984), see GEDTS *Research Brief #9*) that Early Exit graduates tended to leave school because of academic frustration or career advancement, not because they were having problems with school. The tables, and the correlations, indicate that one must be fairly successful in school in order to experience success

. . . taking the GED Tests as part of the Early Exit program is not an "easy out" for someone who can't handle regular school work.

on the GED. In other words, taking the GED Tests as part of the Early Exit program is not an "easy out" for someone who can't handle regular school work.

Summary

The correlations between the GED Tests and the district level tests support the notion that the GED measures intellectual skills and knowledge which one would expect children to develop during their school years. Publishers of the district level tests would make similar claims for their tests. One would hesitate to substitute one test for the other, since the purposes for the two types of programs differ and, generally, the district level tests would be more closely related to the curriculum.

. . . if a student is failing high school classes because of failure to learn, the Early Exit Program won't provide an avenue by which the poor achievers can obtain an easy diploma.

The students whose scores were examined were those who took, and passed, the GED Tests as part of the Early Exit Program. They represent a fairly wide range of achievement, as represented by the district level tests. The relatively low proportion of students in the lower percentile ranges leads one to infer that if low achieving students take the GED, they don't pass it. In other words, if a student

is failing high school classes because of failure to learn, the Early Exit Program won't provide an avenue by which the poor achievers can obtain an easy diploma.

A few of the brightest students appear to elect the Early Exit Program as a way to shorten their tenure in high school. The proportion is not large, and one would not be concerned about any great "brain-drain" from the high schools. It appears that a large majority of the brightest students do remain in school and earn regular high school diplomas.

The Early Exit Program seems to be serving a kind of upper-middle group of students, as measured by the district level tests. They can do what is asked of them, could graduate from high school, but for some reason want to shorten their high school career. For this group of students, the GED provides an opportunity for them to demonstrate that they have learned and are ready to go to other pursuits.

Reference

Ladner, R. (1984). *Educational and Occupational Activities of GED and Conventional High School Graduates in Florida*. A report to the Bureau of Adult and Community Education. Available from the Bureau of Adult and Community Education, Florida Department of Education, Tallahassee, FL 32301.

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